

# Employee Spotlight: Michael Torrez

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Michael (Miguél) Torrez, by day a research technologist in the Laboratory's Materials Physics and Applications Division, spends much of his free time researching New Mexico's family histories and helping interested parties verify or fill in their family tree by complementing any existing document trail with the genetic testing that has become available in recent years.

Torrez conducts research at the New Mexico State Library (photo courtesy of the Albuquerque Journal).

"Tracing one's family history is quite tricky," Torrez says. "Accurate records are often missing or difficult to find, and verbal accounts of a family's origins might get modified or misunderstood as they are passed from generation to generation or translated into different languages. But nowadays we have much greater access to genealogical information than ever before, and genetic testing has really changed the game. All you have to do is get your cheek swabbed. It's no big deal, doesn't hurt and is relatively inexpensive."

Yet even in Torrez's own family it can take time to tease out fiction from fact. Torrez and his sisters-in-law were in his kitchen one day when one of the women suggested that their grandmother, whose maiden name was "Jacquez," had been born in France. Torrez, however, knew enough about the family history, and history in general, to gently disagree. "I explained to the ladies," he recalls, "that the Jacquez name, spelled with or without a 'c,' has a long history in New Mexico and in Mexico before then. A Juan José Jaquez, for instance, lived in Rio Arriba in 1754. While Grandmother Jacquez certainly seems to have had French roots, she did not immigrate into the United States from France."

## **New Mexico DNA Project**

Torrez first became interested in genetic testing in 2004 and today spends part of his evenings and weekends helping the New Mexico DNA Project, a special genetic data set for individuals with colonial New Mexican ancestry.

"The New Mexico DNA Project shows that New Mexico's Hispanic families have a very small gene pool," Torrez suggests. "Not many families came north from Mexico. But those who did come generally contributed a complex genetic make-up, because the original Spaniards who first arrived in the New World usually were not accompanied by Spanish ladies and tended to marry native women. My own DNA test results show that I'm 55 percent European and 34 percent Native American, with the rest coming from a North African Arab (Moorish) background."

Torrez checks historic documents (photo courtesy of the Albuquerque Journal)

One of Torrez's current focus areas within the New Mexico DNA Project is to genetically trace the lineage of families who are descendants of Nicolás de Espinosa, a member of the Juan Paez Hurtado Expedition that reached New Mexico in 1695. The project turned out to be a challenge for many years until Torrez finally found a living descendant of Nicolás de Espinosa who had an unbroken paper trail and allowed Torrez to use the paper information and his DNA as a baseline for comparing the results with other modern-day Espinosas.

"After working on my own genealogy," Torrez says, "I felt a sense of belonging that I had never felt before, and I want to help others feel the same sense of self-empowerment and joy."

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Torrez works for the Materials Physics and Applications Division's Condensed Matter and Magnet Science group.

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## **More**

For more information on Michael Torrez's genetic genealogy research, you can visit his [New Mexico Genetic Genealogy](#) blog.

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